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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/RUS

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SUBJECT: TYUMEN, TOBOLSK SPARKLE IN THEIR OWN WAYS

¶1. Summary: Consul General traveled to Tyumen and Tobolsk May 18-20. In Tyumen, we opened a photographic exhibit, saw the newly renovated American Corner, met with the rector of the oil and gas university and visited the offices of the Halliburton oil services company. In Tobolsk, we met the mayor and toured the superbly restored kremlin complex.

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Tchaikovsky exhibit renews ties

¶2. The PAS-produced photographic exhibit, "Tchaikovsky in America," which celebrates the great composer's participation in the opening of Carnegie Hall in 1891, was warmly received at the Tyumen philharmonic on May 19. Philharmonic director Mikhail Birman recalled the performance of the U.S. Air Force Jazz Band Check Six in Tyumen in 2005 and expressed his interest in having more U.S. musical acts visit the city. Birman, a concert pianist, and Tyumen Philharmonic conductor Anton Sharoyev, a violinist, fondly reminisced about their concert tour of the U.S. in the late 1990's. The opening received extensive print and broadcast media coverage.

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American Corner ready to go

¶3. We were pleased to learn that Tyumen's American Corner, located in the city's main library, had hired a new coordinator and was about to become fully functional again. A series of calamities, including burst pipes last fall and the sudden departure of the previous coordinator had limited the corner's activities for several months. With extensive renovations to the library now complete, we were encouraged by the positive attitude of the library's administration and the enthusiasm of the new coordinator, a recent university graduate and former participant in the U.S. Summer Work and Travel program.

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Tyumen - Oil service industry center thrives

¶4. Nikolay N. Karnaukhov, rector of the Tyumen State Oil and Gas University, told the CG that the future of Russia's energy industry remained with oil and gas. He said that his institution, which has over 60,000 students in Tyumen and other branches in the region, works closely with Russian and international companies to develop technologies to exploit reserves under difficult geologic and climactic conditions. The rector said that his university has extensive contact with U.S. and other western institutions, but most of it was based on personal relationships between academics. Meanwhile, Halliburton representatives said they were in the midst of a three-year service contract with TNK-BP. A 30 percent drop in revenues due to the effects of the global economic crisis had forced the company to cut some staff, but the managers we met with expressed confidence that the company could weather the downturn without further significant layoffs.

¶5. Tyumen has clearly benefited from both its status as center of the oil service industry serving Western Siberia and an enlightened administration. It is a bustling, exceptionally clean city with lots of greenery and numerous public parks. Dozens of late 19th century architectural gems have been

preserved and intelligently integrated into the modern cityscape. An extensive development project along the steep embankment of the Tura River is in the early stages of construction. From a high point above the river, we counted 19 construction cranes rising along the horizon.

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Tobolsk - Siberia's historic capital reborn

¶6. On May 20, CG paid a courtesy call on Tobolsk mayor Ivan Fillipovich Olenberg. The city's main industry is the Neftekhim petrochemical plant, which employs about 5,000 people. The mayor said that unemployment was low and stated flatly that there was no significant foreign investment there. He said the city had exchanges with Council Bluffs, Iowa, in the 1990's, but since then the relationship had languished. Olenburg is 40. He served in the military and then the police until 2005. He has been mayor since 2007.

¶7. The mayor's apparent disinterest in foreign contact is a shame because Tobolsk is in the midst of a 5-year renovation program that is sure to restore its status as the "Pearl of Siberia." Rich in history, Tobolsk is variously known as the Tsarist capital of Siberia, the place of exile of the Decembrists and rebellious Poles in the 19th century, and the city where Tsar Nikolai II and his family were held for 8 months before being transferred to Yekaterinburg in April 1918. Sites relevant to this history abound in the town, but none sparkles like the spectacularly restored kremlin complex, whose white walls and golden domes dominate the old town from a line of bluffs high above the Irtysh River. According to the city's deputy administrator for tourism, about 15% of the city's 130,000 visitors in 2008 were foreigners. Though the CG's comments reflecting the U.S. desire to expand contacts with Russians in a broad range of spheres were narrowly interpreted in media reports to mean tourism, Tobolsk's restoration certainly speaks of its potential in this regard.

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